

The Whipping Boy

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Summary: Tony and Pepper find themselves prisoners of a dangerous and twisted man looking for the final prototype of one of Tony's newest medical inventions. He doesn't seek the information from Tony, however, he seeks it from Pepper. And the more she refuses to answer, for Tony's sake, the more her Whipping Boy will take her punishment. Established Relationship. HEA.

The Whipping Boy

Hello, pretty people! This is a story that I wrote in 2012 for angstbigbang on Livejournal. I hope you enjoy it!

Consciousness comes slowly and, as Tony drifts forward from the grey fog enveloping his brain, the headache comes swiftly. As sad as it is, it's a familiar sensation. Far more often than Pepper knows Tony ends up passed out from overexertion and pain on the flight back over the Atlantic with Jarvis in the pilot's seat. He almost thinks, for a moment, that he's actually in the suit now, but he isn't stifled, as he is in it, and the air around him feels cold and stale. He peels his eyelids open, slowly, and soon the room comes into soft dim focus around him.

He's lying on a concrete floor; the only light in the room is shining from the arc in his chest, washing the ceiling in a haze of blue. He needs to focus and figure out what the hell is going on. And then he remembers in a flash of pain across the back of his skull. He and Pepper, dinner on the private terrace at the Bel Cibo, intimate conversation and a walk in the attached gardens capped off with a blow to the back of the head during a particularly distracting kiss. He rolls to his side to check for a lump, his eyes sliding closed as he hisses out a wince, fighting down the sudden nausea. The lump is there, sure enough, but there's also a soreness in his neck and, he discovers on further search for injuries, shoulders. His clothing is disheveled and he's missing his shoes.

Moments pass and, when the pain in his head isn't warring with violent nausea any longer, he decides to brave moving again. Bracing himself, he slowly opens his eyes, this time a little more prepared to wait for clarity instead of forcing it. It's Pepper's still form sprawled half-on half-off a mattress in the corner that has his heart launching into his throat and beating a staccato rhythm. He watches for a few frozen horrifying seconds, waiting for her to move, to sigh, to twitch. Then he lurches to his feet and, fighting dizziness, makes his way toward her.

Tony collapses on his knees at her side, his headache eclipsed by the fear and panic that floods his system. His throat starts to constrict, and his eyes burn with unshed tears but he knows he can't have a meltdown now. If she's hurt, he's got to be able to do something about it. He forces his hands steady, something he's had plenty of practice at since Afghanistan, and gently, carefully reaches for Pepper's pulse. A moment of watching her breast steadily rise and fall and feeling the strength of her pulse under his fingertips goes a long way to easing his fears. He heaves a long relieved sigh and carefully skims his hands along the length of her arms and legs, around her torso and hips searching for breaks or swelling or bleeding. Gently, ever so gently, his fingers skim her head looking for lumps, but he doesn't find any.

After placing a careful and thankful kiss on her forehead, he moves to his knees, a little more steadily now thanks to the rush of adrenaline, and surveys her form. Her arms lay alongside her, mostly straight in a not uncomfortable position. The same with her legs, though one of them is bent at the knee, but her tea length skirt is pulled down carefully to preserve her dignity. He notes, with annoyance, that she's been more or less placed on the ground, rather than unceremoniously dumped as he had been; his own arms spread wide and his legs tangled up in one another.

He stands and this time the blow to the head catches up with him. He stumbles to a wall for support as his vision blurs and his breath comes short and shallow. He stays like that for longer than a moment, grounding himself. Underneath his hand, the cement wall glows an eerie grey blue; he thinks they're cinder blocks, probably filled in and painted over. When he feels better, like his head's back on straight and he can breathe right again, he slowly and carefully prowls the room trying to glean as much information as he can from their surroundings and habitat.

The three main walls are the same filled and painted cement blocks, the lines smooth and unmarred by windows, no natural light would get in. That means no way to track days, except by their internal clocks, and those would be more than easy to manipulate. Frowning, he turns his attention to the ceiling. There, one at each end, are two small rectangular holes, likely old uncovered ventilation ducts by their size and what he can see of the insides; Tony doubts they'll be of much use. There's also a large light inset into the ceiling and flush with the concrete. Even if Tony manages to get up to it, which is doubtful, he can't see any place to wedge it open and he doesn't have the tools. With a frustrated sigh, he dismisses the light.

All other avenues exhausted, he turns his attention to the front wall. The room is a rectangle, twice as wide as it is deep, with their bed situated along the left front corner, and the only way out

on the far right. The door is large and metal, made of heavy iron and resembling something found in an old prison or some medieval torture chamber. It's more high tech than it looks, he's sure, but as he studies it, he's struck with the notion that the layout affords them some semblance of privacy. The room is shaped like a rectangle, wider than it is long, with the bed pressed up against the same wall as the door. His gaze darts to Pepper, and he notes again that she has been comfortably laid out, her skirt covering her legs demurely, not even a hint of knee or thigh showing beneath the hem.

Tony looks closer at the mattress, new though devoid of plastic, and notices a pile of sheets and a pillow still in their packaging stacked at one end. He turns the idea in his head again. They have privacy, new, and probably, nice things. Odds were if their captors have gone through all this trouble to make them comfortable and to keep them secure, then they'd be fed and well taken care of. Ideas and reasons behind his and Pepper's capture begin swirling, without sense or direction, around his mind. Why has Tony been treated like so much refuse while Pepper's been delicately handled and demurely placed?

Before any of the mad plots or theories can solidify, he stops himself. He doesn't have time for any guessing game bullshit. Again eying the mattress, Tony thinks of moving Pepper further onto it. Too many possibilities nag at him, though. What if the reason that she's being treated so carefully is that they've hurt her badly? What if she's got broken bones or a concussion or something isn't right and he causes her further harm? Not for the first time since he's awakened, he wishes Jarvis was but a spoken command away. He leaves her there, half cradled by the mattress, half lying on the hard floor. If Pepper wakes up, when Pepper wakes up, she can help fill in the gaps in his memory.

He inches, carefully and slowly, along the wall toward the barred door to their prison cell and peeks through to the other side. His relief at seeing no one on the other side is short lived as he catalogues every item and piece of equipment along his visual trajectory. The next room is much smaller, maybe a quarter of the size of their cell, sealed by another large heavy metal door. It's solid with only a small sliding window at eye level and a heavy matching handle interrupting its smooth surface. Both the lock and the handle to slide the window must be on the other side.

His hands search for a locking mechanism on the outside of their cell door and he isn't surprised to find the area lacking. He catches the glimpse of the security pad set high in the wall alongside the door just as his fingers find empty space. His frustration mounts when he finds the keys well out of reach. The only other objects in the room prove to be of the bittersweet variety. Computers. Sweet manageable, hackable, sevicable computers that are completely and utterly useless to him unless he can get his itchy little fingers all over their keyboards and wring sweet cries of vengeance from their depths. He shakes himself and focuses on the things they can do for him instead of the thing they cannot.

Computers mean intelligence, physical and mental. Computers mean money, the kind that can snatch Ironman and his woman directly from the heart of Sacramento without leaving a trace behind. There are three screens, all of them displaying various images and data that it takes him a moment to can't focus on. When the blurred images finally

come into focus, he can plainly see the layout of security cameras.

He turns, slowly, back to their cell and examines the cameras mounted in the corners of the room. He sighs in aggravation, and a hint of maddening "crippling" despair, when he realizes that not only were they firmly out of his reach, but wrapped in a thick grated cage and completely inaccessible.

One of them has been mounted and pointed toward the doorway in which he now stands, covering the area neatly and securely. He tilts his head up and back, refusing to wince and have it seen by the men he knows will end up watching it, and follows the path of the camera mounted above him back along the wall toward the other corner there.

That camera, he can tell from the directionality of the blinking red light, is aimed lower than the others but is still pointed adjacent across the room to the mattress that Pepper's lying half on top of. It's only when he turns his vision at the bank of screens again that he realizes that he can only see the bottom of Pepper's foot at the top of the screen. He fights the urge to run to her and remove even that small amount from their field of view. He follows the camera mounted above the mattress back to the point where he started, at the camera looking at him from the opposite corner.

Every speck of ground is covered by the cameras except for the small space where they would be sleeping. He can't begin to speculate on what their captors' reasoning for allowing them this privacy might be, and he fights the urge to fret whether the cameras were fixed or movable. He studies the base of the one above his head. The cameras are all shrouded in darkness except for this one. There's just enough light from the control room for him to see that they won't be moving anytime soon.

He gives a cursory glance to the bare wall, noting another door similar to the exit but with the locking mechanism on the inside instead. He wonders if it's another cell, but ignores it for the moment. He's more concerned with what he knows for certain than speculation.

Tony is so lost in his rage and frustration that he starts when Pepper shifts and groans from unconsciousness. Immediately he's there beside her and glad, so glad, they can't be watched for their reunion. Anthony Stark has only one weakness left in this world. The truth of that is clear as the a star in the night sky when the tears glisten in his eyes as she brings a trembling hand to her head, and a hoarse and frightened 'Tony' tumbles from her lips.

Later, when she's sitting up on the bed and leaning uncomfortably against the wall, Tony sits stunned at the story she's related to him. He goes back over it slowly, for the hundredth time.

Pepper hadn't been able to make a noise. They'd chloroformed her while she'd been staring in stunned silence at him crumpled on the ground in a heap. Afterward, when she woke up and started banging in a panic at the small coffin-like box they'd been shoved into, they'd both been injected with some type of tranquilizer gun.

The next thing she remembers is waking up in their cell.

It's only been about fifteen minutes since she's woken up, even though it feels like hours. Tony hasn't stopped touching her since. Suddenly, the creaking of old metal has him lurching painfully to his feet and standing protectively in front of her. To her credit, he notices that she doesn't take it sitting down either, and moves up to stand just behind and to the left of him, ever the proper and resourceful PA.

There's movement in the little outer room, and Tony pushes them backward, out of the range of the cameras, unwilling to let his attackers get even that much of a glimpse of them. The man that enters their cell is tall with a head full of dark hair, a strong chin and nose, and a pair of the most familiar and arresting eyes. Eyes he hasn't seen since the night that Obadiah Stane died. The difference is that these eyes aren't bright with madness. These are a clear and happy summer sky blue that look somewhat mockingly at him as the cell light blazes fully, Tony flinches against the glare and Pepper shields her eyes.

Tony feels Pepper move behind him but he doesn't turn away, focusing on the man in front of him as he begins to speak.

"No, I am not my father come back from the dead. My name is Lincoln Carver, and I'm my father's first and only illegitimate bastard. Don't worry about me, though; he paid my mother well enough."

"Born on the wrong side of the blanket, eh? I'll bet that sucked." Tony's not intimidated, not as much as he probably should be, and even as Pepper places a hand on his arm to stay his words, he continues. "Can't say I'm surprised that the apple didn't fall far from the tree."

Lincoln explodes at those words.

"I am nothing like him!" His face contorts as the rage courses through him. He shouts an order, and guards come rushing in. Before Tony can react, he's being dragged from Pepper and thrust up against the wall, face first. He twists his face to the side and sees Pepper, her arms pulled back behind her, breasts thrust forward and being ogled by another guard. Carver seems not to notice, intent as he is on smoothing back his unmussed hair and straightening his cuffs.

Eventually Carver comes back to the present and looks around. A pleased expression passes over his face when he sees Tony pressed painfully against the wall and Pepper overpowered. He struts for a moment before moving to Tony.

"This can be so easy, Mr. Stark. All you have to do is tell me where the prototype for CRISYS is."

Pepper pales, and Tony's mood changes instantly from defiant to angry. CRISYS, or the Cryostasis Insulating and Healing System, is one of his most recent inventions to come into the testing phase. Highly secretive, and potentially dangerous, it was currently in the animal testing phase in a remote facility in India. If it performed well, it would move into the trial phase, voluntary of course, and eventually, hopefully, it would be in hospitals within the decade.

Of course, Tony wasn't going to tell him any of that. In time, CRISYS should be capable of healing the most detrimental and life shattering injuries, but with a small software change, it could be used to create monstrosities. The possibility of something so dangerous getting into the hands of anyone but himself literally makes Tony sick to his stomach. Before he can reply, Lincoln passes by Tony to where Pepper is being held.

"But I know that isn't going to happen. You're much too stubborn, self serving, and protective of your creations." Tony again struggles against the hands holding him to the wall as Carver reaches out and trails a finger down Pepper's cheek, over her neck and along her collar bone. "This one, though, doesn't have your tendencies, does she?" Carver leans close to Pepper, breathes in the scent of her hair.

"Let her go, or I swear to God, Carver, I'll kill you!" Lincoln waves his hand, nonchalantly in Tony's direction. The guard pressing his face into the wall lets up for a moment, getting a good grip on his hair before bringing forcing his head forward, repeatedly, causing his head to impact with the wall again. After that, Carver pays Tony little attention and Tony, not a stupid man by any means, says nothing further. Instead he watches, listens, and learns.

"Now, Miss Potts-"

"Ms. Potts." Pepper interrupts him.

"Ms. Potts" he concedes. "If you would but tell me the information I seek, you would save Mr. Stark a great deal of trouble." Tony watches as Pepper's eyes darken with concern and weariness. "I know, Ms. Potts, that you strive to make everything easier for Mr. Stark in all aspects of his life. I promise you, dearest Pepper," her eyes narrow now, at the epithet, "that if you tell me now what I need to know, it will make things much easier for him."

"No. Not ever, for anyone. Especially not the bastard offspring of a money-hungry back-stabbing conniving sonofabitch like Obadiah Stane."

The look that Carver pins Pepper with promises violence and swift retribution, but he doesn't make a move to vent that rage on her. Instead he smiles softly and grips her chin with his fingers.

"You know, Ms. Potts, that is exactly the type of answer I was looking for. You see, something told me that you would need a lesson in etiquette. While you normally keep your temper on a very short leash, I took the gamble that the situation would be foreign enough for you to drop your normal calm façade. Now, Ms. Potts, I would direct your attention to Mr. Stark. Your new whipping boy. Every time you suffer an attack of defiance or entertain thoughts of disobeying me, Mr. Stark will bear the consequence." He turns to the guards holding her. "Keep her still lads and don't let her turn her head." Then he instructs Tony's guards. "Well boys, Ms. Potts had greatly provoked my anger. She deserves a beating for her insolence."

Tony fights and struggles against his captors with every ounce of strength left in him, which isn't nearly enough. He's weak from the sedative, the blow to the head, and his initial struggle against the

guards; his body hurts so much that there isn't anything he wouldn't give for his suit right now. His movements are slow and ragged as he pulls against the arms holding him upright. There seem to be more of them now than there was earlier, and he still can't focus on them right.

The breath flies out of him with the first punch to his stomach, and as he fights to breathe, feeling like he's already suffocating and God why won't he just breathe, another blow follows. The next one, to the side of his face, distracts his body from his inability to draw a breath, and he suddenly and violently sucks in deeply. I'm Ironman! Tony thinks fleetingly, as another blow strikes him in the side, close to his kidney. I'm Ironman! Isn't that the reasoning he'd given the judge for not forfeiting the plans? Ironman isn't the suit, it's the man inside the suit?

Another blow to his chest, just to the left of the arc implant, brings home the fact that in the end, without the suit, he's not Ironman. He's only a man.

The bed is infinitely softer and more comfortable than the floor was the last time Tony found himself fighting to wake up and for a moment he forgets the beating he took in Pepper's place. Eventually he does remember though. So when he finally opens his eyes it's the sight of Pepper, crying in relief and pushing him back into the pillow, that has him sending thanks to whoever that's he's around to do it.

"Are you ok?" he asks her.

"Am I ok? Tony, they beat you into unconsciousness! How can you ask if I'm ok?" She's frantic, Tony realizes, barely holding on to that renowned Virginia Potts control. Despite the agony in his limbs and head, he reaches out and draws her down to him. She resists, briefly, but the weight of their situation and her relief to have him awake, causes her to shudder against him.

He holds her while she cries and tries to think of ways to get them out of here, to save her from whatever Carver has in mind. The answers never come. Pepper is the first one to speak.

"What's going to happen to us?" Pepper's voice is muffled from where she's pressing her face against his chest, and he tightens his grip despite the pain in his shoulder joints.

"We're going to survive, Pepper. And we're going to get out of this, but until then, we have to make sure that we don't let them break us. We can't let them break us or we'll be lost." He hopes she understands what he's trying to get across to her.

Their relationship is so new, so fragile, that he's afraid of the impact this new development will have on it. Pepper would never betray him; he knows that, but he's worried what that loyalty could cost her. She breathes deeply and trembles out a sigh.

"I'll never let him know, Tony."

He kisses her forehead and then her lips. "I know, Pepper. I know. Did you make the bed?"

Pepper props herself up on her elbow and leans down to trace his

hairline along his forehead.

"That I did. Carver and his men dumped you onto the floor and left, but kept the lights blazing long enough for me to get the bed in order and start to drag you to it." She pauses and Tony note her eyes change to a darker stormier blue before she continues. "Carver sent one of the men in to lift you onto the bed. He said-" She stops abruptly and instead of continuing on, slips under the sheet and thin blanket they've been provided.

Not without acute pain, Tony turns on his side to face her and, kissing her again on the forehead, pleads with her. "Pepper, what did he say?"

She huffs out a breath of annoyed frustration and lowers her voice, mindful of the cameras. "He said that our stay here should be as luxurious as possible, that we should live in comfort until he comes back to question us." A muscle bunching and releasing in Tony's cheek is the only outward show of his anger. So, Carver wants to play mind games does he? Fine. Lincoln Carver would see just how good at the game Tony was.

They spend what Tony figures is two peaceful nights, or maybe it was afternoons, under the delicate care of Lincoln Carver's men. They eat twice daily, at presumably the same times if he's judging his rate of hunger properly. The lights stay at the lowest possible setting when they aren't eating, and shortly after each meal, they're both led through the computer room and into the only other room that Tony observed earlier for bathroom breaks. They are even offered time to shower in the private stall once daily.

The morning of the third 'day,' Tony finds that he can't shake the sense of foreboding that's weighing heavily on his shoulders, and when he meets Pepper's eyes, he knows she can feel it too. She reaches out and when she takes his hand in hers, he's not as quick as he's been to stop the trembling. She knows him so well, and his hands have ever only shaken once in all the years they've known each other. The nights after Afghanistan, the symptoms, the PTSD. He can tell by her look and her tone that she remembers too.

"Tony."

"I'm fine, Pepper." His tone is equally quiet, though a little rough.

"No, Tony, you're not."

"I have to be." Here he grabs both of her hands and pulls them to his chest, causing her torso to follow. He tucks her head beneath his chin and releases her hands letting his own settle on her thighs. "I have to be fine Pepper. I have to be. If I'm notâ€¦" She pulls back from him and, taking his face in her hands, leans close and speaks softly.

"Anthony Edward Stark, you made it through Afghanistan with a man you barely knew, and managed to create the suit out of bits and pieces of left over metal and rounds from your armory." He winces. Pepper, only Pepper, knows of the man who gave him a reason to live and gave his life so that Tony might survive. His eyes close briefly, and he fights back an image of the damn cave and toting around that damn

battery and his head going under the water, can't breathe can't stand can't feel going to die going to dieâ€¦

Pepper saves him this time. Her fingers tighten on him, and she says his name in a sharp tone that brings him right back to the here and now. "Yinsen helped you any way he could, and I'm going to do the same. You just need to tell me what you need from me!"

Tony sighs and buries his face in the hollow between Pepper's neck and shoulder. "All I need from you, Pepper, is for you to be you. Nothing but you. Don't worry about me, ok. They can't kill me â€" they need that information. We just don't say anything."

She sighs, but her hands rubbing along his back and sides tell him she's going to give in.

"I don't like it, Tony. I don't like you being beat when I have the power to stop it, but I'm realistic enough to know what CRISYS can turn into in the hands of someone as bad as that." Her voice cracks, but she continues. "I won't tell him anything, but you have to promise me." She grabs his hands and wraps them around her and he finally gives in to the need to just cling to her and soak in her love and her comfort. "Promise me you'll tell me when it's too much."

He nods even as he hears the sound of their cage door grating open. "I love you, Pepper."

"I love you too." The lights flicker on brightly overhead, and they turn to face their attacker.

Tony can hear them talking, but he can't see anyone but Pepper. She's seated in a chair in front of him, not tied to a chair in front of him. His brain is in a fog, in a haze from the blows he'd received. His muscles ache, and his wrists are burning from where he's struggled against the ropes. He wonders if they're not burned.

"It really is a simple question, Ms. Potts." Carver's voice. He never speaks to Tony, only Pepper. He refuses to acknowledge Tony's presence except with a flick or a wrist in a signal to begin or stop whatever punishment he's doling out. He's interrogating her again. Tony fights to clear his head, but his hearing fails him for a moment, and he can't make out any of her answer except the angry and hurt tone of her voice. And he wonders briefly, just briefly, why she sounds so hurt. A sharp pain from his kidney reminds him.

"Tsk tsk, Ms. Potts. Surely this back and forth routine we've been having for days now is getting tiring. It certainly is for me, my dear. It is getting simply frustrating. I'm afraid that we'll have to go back to the water."

"No!" Pepper's shrieking now, and it reminds him to fight, not to let it happen. Water keeps ringing through his brain and there isn't anything he doesn't want right now more than water. "Stop this, Carver, stop! You can't keep doing this. You can't." Tony thinks, in a moment of lucidity, that Carver must have signaled the men. Pepper starts screaming again, more frantic now. When he tries, Tony can see the tears coursing down her face. "Stop! Stop it! Please don't, not again, please don't!"

"Now now, Ms. Potts, there's no need for all this emotion. Just tell me where CRISYS is. Tell me some shipping manifests and deployment routes. Tell me the secret to the Iron Man suit. Tell me anything, Ms. Potts. I can't give something for nothing."

Pepper bites her lip, and Tony searches frantically for her eyes, the gag in his mouth preventing him from saying anything. Their gazes meet, and Pepper cries silently and clamps her lips shut. She closes her eyes and shakes her head, and his finicky hearing does little to shut out her sobs.

"Now now, Ms. Potts. Remember the rules. If you don't keep your eyes open, I don't give the signal to haul him up. Everything, my dear Ms. Potts, is dependent on your actions." She does open her eyes to glare at Carver, looking directly at him for the first time. Tony follows her gaze and pins Carver, resplendent in a dark blue pinstriped suit made from linen and silk, with a violent glare. He doesn't miss the movement that's going on in his peripheral vision.

Carver points back across the room to Tony, and Pepper follows the direction of his pointing finger. They share a glance before the gag is pulled from his mouth, and he feels the pressure on the back of his skull, sees the water rising up to meet him. His struggles are quickly renewed as he shifts his feet to a wider stance and crouches slightly to hold the weight of the man pushing on his shoulders and head.

He has a fleeting thought that all the fighting and healing has sapped his body of what comfortable fat there was left on him. Whether the weight loss is from an inability to eat while he nurses his concussion or strictly from the rigorous exercise he's been putting his body through, he doesn't know, nor does he waste the time now thinking on it. He is stronger physically now from the brutal trials of their time here, and he's able to hold the guards off long enough for them to get frustrated and kick his legs out from under him.

Then the water's rushing up, and all he sees is black. It's enveloping him, pushing in on him, crushing him into a tight little ball until at last he opens his mouth and screams into the water. The sound of it reverberates in the water and breaks the surface as only a hint of the feedback that echoes in his ears. The shock of it serves to snap Tony back, and he pulls his feet back under him even while the water rushes into his lungs. He comes back to the surface, coughing and vomiting only to be dunked again.

The brief instance that he is above the water, though, he can hear Pepper, crying and screaming profanities at Carver. He would have smiled if he wasn't too busy trying not to die, fighting against those above him and trying to hold onto his panic. He holds his breath as long as he can, and coming up for air inside a cement cave doesn't help his state of mind. He's fighting again, pushing against the weight across his shoulders and trying to shake the hand from his hair, all the while the hovering on the edge consciousness. If only he could just breathe.

Instinct wins over again, and more water rushes into his lungs. Then there's air on his face and concrete under his back. A booted foot kicks him over onto his side, and he retches up the water, his throat burning and his shoulders shaking fiercely. The water spreads beneath

him, looking like blood on the dirty concrete. He can feel the darkness coming, and the sound that meets his ears before he falls into its clutches is Pepper's frantic crying.

A slap brings him back around. New points of pain and pressure tell him that he's not lying on the floor anymore, but his equilibrium is off and he can't tell if the room is really spinning or if it's just a trick of his mind. When Pepper, still crying and still tied to that damn chair, passes through his field of view, he realizes that he is spinning and he focuses all of his will power into concentrating on his body. The pain in his arms and back explodes back into him with a searing force that brings lightheadedness. Tony fights that, though, knowing they'll just bring him back to consciousness. He groans to buy himself some time.

With each spin, he catches little glimpses of Pepper. Her tears are silent now and her eyes reflect her own special brand of torture, but she's more still more mad than sad, and Tony thinks that's got to be good. That she can manage to be angry as a wet cat in the face of her own psychological torture and gentle as a summer breeze when caring for him afterwards is a testament to the inner strength that sustains them both. Tony knows that he wouldn't make it if she broke before he did.

He's waiting for what's coming next, but they just seem to be ignoring him for the moment. Carver starts in questioning Pepper over and over. Where is CRISYS? What are some of the shipment routes? How can he get into Tony's personal database? What are the weapons manifests? She keeps answering the same as before. I'm not telling you, or I don't know.

Whenever Tony stops turning, or Carver gives the signal, one of the guards throws another punch at his body, causing another piercing pain to slice through him from the blow and his aching shoulder joints and sending him spinning again. He can hear Pepper cry out each time. The questioning is getting increasingly frantic and the answers outright obvious. Carver has to know that any knowledge Pepper might have had about manifests and shipping lanes would be outdated and useless by now, right?

Finally, when they realize that Tony's losing consciousness on a more frequent basis, Carver calls a halt to the events. He's barely awake when they pull him from the hook that holds him and remove the handcuffs. He doesn't remember them tossing him on the bed, or Pepper being released from the chair, he knows only that she's there, holding him and putting a salve and bandages around his raw wrists. She coerces him into taking a few painkillers and then sleep claims him.

Carver is relatively true to his word of their comfort. Tony's well cared for after each bout of torture, and Pepper's never taken from him. He wants them each well aware of the effects the violence is having on the other. They're well fed and kept clean, and medicines and clothing and fresh linens are provided so that their captivity is as humane as possible. Still, it's captivity and torture all the same.

There isn't any sense or pattern to the violence and degradation they're forced to endure; Carver might come two days in a row to force information from them or he might leave them be for a long

stretch of time.

Pepper cries when she thinks he's sleeping. She doesn't know he knows it, but he watches her do it every day. Tony wonders if it's cleansing for her in some way, if she uses it as a way to cope the same way he uses exercise. For Tony, the pushing and the pulling and devoting every ounce of strength into that one thing so there's no room left for anything else, was a godsend. He alternates between trying to comfort her and making his own body stronger in the days they're left alone to fret.

The worry and the anticipation wears on them, but neither succumbs to bickering and fighting. Both are too concerned for the other, and they both know that he can't go on like this forever. He's been shaking for ages now, and the nightmares are finally breaking through the walls he'd long ago placed around them. Finally, it's Pepper who broaches the subject.

"You're not doing well." She says as she takes his face in her hands forcing him to look directly at her. In an effort to placate him, she scratches his new beard with her broken and chipped fingernails. The damn thing itches constantly, and it comforts him that even here, in the dimly lit cell they live their lives, she's still Pepper underneath all the fear and determination. She still does little things to make him feel better. He tilts his head like a dog directing her scratching.

"I'm fine."

"Isn't that the oldest lie in the book." She pauses in her scratching and turns his face back to hers. "You woke me up last night." His gaze darts away from her searching eyes. He doesn't want to see pity in them, not from her, but it's only for a moment before he knows that if anyone can offer him true understanding, it's Pepper. It breaks his heart.

"I'll be okay, Pepper. If you can be okay, then I can be ok. If you hold on, I can too. I'll do it for you, Pepper. We can do it for each other, right? We can do this?"

By now, he's pressed his face into the crook of her shoulder and neck, seeking comfort. Her hands slide into his hair and run softly over his neck and cheek.

"I'm so scared Tony. I'm so scared every time they hurt you, and I know it's my fault. I justâ€¦ It hurts so much to see it, knowing that I can stop it." Her hands are frantic now, running up and down his arms across his back. She grasps the bottom of the white tank top he's wearing and draws it over his head, then pushes him back and reverses their position. Her face borrows against his chest, her hands grip his sides, and he pulls her against him in an effort to comfort her. "I need you, Tony. I need you now."

His worry and concern vies with his body's desperate desire to give in to her baser demands.

"Pepper, no. We can't-" He hasn't pressed this the entire time they've been here. He doesn't want it to happen here, among all the damage being done, all the violence wrought on them. If it happened here, if he makes love to her now, won't that destroy the delicate

hold they've already got on their relationship? Won't that be the final act of degradation? Won't it be the last thing tainted by their terrible predicament?

"Tony. I need you. I need to know that we're okay, that you don't hate me, that you're alive, that you still want me. I need you Tony. I need you right now." She's looking up at him with tear filled eyes, boldly catching his gaze and meeting her fears head on. She's pleading with him, and it breaks him.

"Never, Pepper. I couldn't ever hate you, and I'll always want you."

Their lips meet in a crushing kiss. Her hands tear at the waistband of his sweats, pulling them down and off with frantic jerky movements propelled onward by her fear and need. He does the same, divesting her of her t-shirt and pants just as quickly, gliding his hands over her pale skin reverently. Even here, she's beautiful. In the dim light of an underground prison, she's beautiful, and she's his, and she wants him. The sight of his bandaged wrists doesn't deter him from appreciating the exquisite way she's been put together. Thinner frame or no, she takes his breath away.

He doesn't stop touching her when he reaches out and pulls the blanket from its pile at the center of the bed and over them. She's touching him everywhere: his back, his chest, his arms and legs, soothing sore muscles and aching bruises with the barest of touches. But when she wraps her legs around his hips and catches his mouth in another bruising kiss, she isn't gentle or caring. She is fierce and demanding in her need, fiery in her passion and desire, and he can tell from the little noises she makes as she moves that she's aching too.

Neither of them needs much in the way of foreplay, and they come together quickly, maddeningly, fully with their lips and hands touching, pulling, grasping, and directing. Pepper whispers direction in his ear, traces the shell of it with her tongue, bites sharply on his lobe, and digs her heels into his back when he complies with her. In the end, it's what both of them need, a little solace in the storm, and they sleep.

Afterward, when they wake, Tony tightens his arms around her and she clings to him while she quietly weeps. "We'll get out soon. They'll find us." His words sound hollow to them both.

They sleep for hours, Carver seeming content to let them wonder and worry, but they refuse to play into his hand. Tony's stronger now than when they arrived, strength achieved through blood and sweat, pain and tears. His willpower seems to be adding strength to his body, and now, with his emotional reservoir renewed, he thinks he's capable of overpowering them, at least for a little while.

He looks to Pepper, soft in sleep, and promises himself that before this is over, he'll be type of man this doesn't happen too. He'll be the man that protects his woman from danger and terror. He'll be Ironman, weather he's wearing the suit or not.

It's days later when Carver shows up again. They're still asleep when the grating of their cell door echoes out. Carver doesn't usually arrive until they've been awake a few hours. He doesn't relish in the

torture until they've eaten and bathed, enjoyed all the creature comforts he offers. Tony's up and standing, feet spread wide fists clenched before they even come in through the door his eyes raking Carver for any clues or details that might help them. The sight of the man, awake, alert, nonchalant and perfectly put together, make him wonder again how disjointed his internal clock is.

Though most of him is disappointed to see seven men instead of five file through the door in front of Carver, a part of Tony is secretly pleased that they feel the need to bring an extra two men to contain him. He can hear Pepper behind him, having woken when he rolled her away from her and stood. She's pulling the blankets around her and, by the rustling, frantically searching for pants. The undercurrent of her fear and anxiety is threatening to seep into him, but he knows Pepper's stronger than she looks and sometimes acts, and he clings to that knowledge.

It's a hard thing to do when a few scrawny men carry in a large wooden chair and a familiar piece of equipment, its large heavy cables running back through the door of the cell. His initial thought is to make a dash for the still open doorway; t they've only ever left it open one other time; but he'd never make it with Pepper in tow and leaving her is out of the question.

Instead he turns and faces Lincoln Carver with an aggressive glare.

"Why, Ms. Potts, have I interrupted something?" Carver ignores him, as always.

Pepper comes to stand beside Tony, her arms crossed over her breasts trying to hide the fact that she's not wearing a bra under Tony's tank. Tony regrets the loss of his shirt as today's torture rolls past his line of vision, the burns would be worse without even that flimsy layer of protection. It turns on with a hum and he nearly flinches, instead he leans down and snatches Peppers sweatshirt from the foot of the mattress and pulls it over her head. She's always discreetly covered herself in as many layers as she can manage when Carver and his men come to them. Now Carver's looking a bit too interested and Tony's anxious to have his lecherous gaze distracted. True to form though, with the distraction out of sight it's out of mind and Carver returns his attention to Pepper's face, his expression dripping with disdain.

"Really, Ms. Potts, I thought you were better than that."

Tony slips his arm around Pepper's waist in an effort to calm her trembling. He knows she's seen the equipment as well, and the terror at having to watch him being electrocuted again is something that she's been dreading since the first time Carver introduced them to it. Tony refuses to think of the endless days it took for the burns to heal, of the new and bright pink skin the wounds left behind on his chest and stomach. He looks at the men slowly closing in around him and Pepper. Five of them are wearing thick working gloves, an addition since the last time. More men to take turns holding him and a longer period of time before they feel the shocks themselves.

Tony pulls Pepper close and holds her tight against him, leaning down into her ear he whispers. "I can hold on if you can." She nods and touches her lips to his just as hands grab her from behind and yank

her away from him.

In hindsight, it's probably the hands that do him in. Seeing them touching her, manhandling her, sends him over the edge. Pepper isn't touched like that; Pepper isn't baggage to be tossed about. He throws a punch at the man closest to him, catching him across the jaw and sending him sprawling. Tony lands a few more punches on one of the men that had grabbed Pepper before he's brought, panting and struggling, to the floor beneath the weight of three of the men.

"Tony! Tony! No!" Peppers screaming at him and he slows to a stop reading the message between the lines. Save your strength. It's what she's begging him to do. Save his strength so she can.

Carver chooses that moment to chime in.

"Ms. Potts, you really should keep a tighter rein on your boy. He'll have gone through enough before our appointment is through, and I'd hate to see all the fight run out of him so soon." Pepper meets his gaze with a glare, but doesn't respond any further to Carver.

Pepper's tired of the game. She's tired of Carver using Tony to make her feel responsible when she was anything but. A realization and confession that she'd come to as they were drifting off to sleep only hours ago. Carver's questions are out of context and on the verge of lunacy and she'd vowed not to say another word to him.

Wrenched back to the present by the hands on his arms, Tony watches as she meekly walks off with the men holding her arms. She doesn't struggle; it only brings on rougher treatment and other, worse, reactions. Carver sees that kind of behavior as disobeying orders, and takes out that agitation on Tony who's more than willing to take a few punches if it means Pepper gets to show her outrage at being molested.

Tony focuses on Pepper while they drag him over to the chair and force him to sit. It's easier to get lost in her eyes instead of focusing on the wide strap they fasten around his chest, just below the arc reactor. Though he does notice that instead of threading the leftover length of leather through the back half of the buckle, they leave it hanging. One quick movement would be enough to undo the strap. He knows that this is likely the only time that they'll get any kind of chance to escape. He may have been halfway to hell the last time they used this form of recreational entertainment, but he hadn't been too far gone to notice the lights overhead flickering in the after math, or the tech in the other room complaining of the computer shutdown. The effects of his punishment will sap him, slowly and painfully, of any strength and control he has. Still, he has to be ready.

Carver's apparently ready to get back to business, because he has Pepper brought forward and tied to another chair directly in front of him. This it's more for show; Carver knows she won't leave alone. Tony can see them both clearly as the questioning begins.

"Ms. Potts. Where is CRISYS located?" The man next to Tony flips a few switches on the machine, and the long metal rod at the end buzzes to life with electricity, crackling quietly. Pepper flinches, but

doesn't respond. Her eyes focus on Tony's.

"What are the shipping routes for Stark Industries Weapons?" Again, silence. The guards pull their gloves up tighter on their arms, and Tony sees that they only have rubber on the palms. Gardening gloves of some type. Carver, meanwhile, is growing agitated at Pepper's continued silence. After a moment, he does something unexpected and foreign to his behavior thus far; he grabs Pepper by her chin and forces her face to look in his direction. He's never touched her before, and the image of it sends sparks of rage and anger and helplessness through Tony as he struggles. His efforts are quickly restrained by the many men around him.

Pepper is staring angrily into Carver's eyes, and the other man is visibly shaking. He looks away and tears a hand through his carefully combed hair before he meets her gaze again and starts to speak.

"I'm serious this time, Ms. Potts. You had better tell me what I want to know. I'm slowly losing patience, and your whipping boy might not make it through the next bout." It's another break with tradition, this direct mention of Tony for the second time today when Carver's previously gone out of his way not to even acknowledge his presence. When Pepper still doesn't reply, he lifts his hand almost nonchalantly, and with a twitch of his wrist, the prod comes down.

Fire lights through Tony. He can hear the electricity as it scorches through him, burns him. It tightens his body, and he can't help but strain and push against the arms holding him. Even as he fights against the pain and the agony, against the fear that his implant will shut down without restarting, he's aware of the passage of time. Surely he can't hold on any longer. But he has to, for just a moment longer he has to.

It happens quicker than he expects. The lights don't flicker this time, or struggle to stay lit. They just die along with the current that's racing through him. Tony lets himself breathe and relax for a moment, but still acts quicker than the few men that were holding onto him during the voltage. The straps about his wrist, old and worn leather strips that they are, have broken under the pressure, and he takes advantage of the mobility to quickly undo the hanging strap across his chest.

Each movement is like fire on his tender and abused muscles, but he drives on focused and determined to take advantage of the bit of surprise he's been waiting for. The impact vibrates up his arm and into his chest when he lands a heavy hit on the body of the nearest man.

"He's free!"

"Get to the door!"

"Pepper!"

"Tony!" When she replies it's on an indrawn breath instead of a shout, and it's in the blue glow of his arc that reveals Carver holding a knife to her throat.

"Let her go, Carver." He's trying his damndest to keep his voice

smooth and low, calm and cool, but the fire is still licking his limbs, crackling in his chest and instead the sound is gravely and dangerous. "I promise that I won't kill you if you just let her go."

Lincoln Carver smiles, an expression that reveals all of his teeth and is neither comforting nor pleasant. He tightens one hand around Peppers neck and moves the knife toward her hands.

"It is nice to have your light guiding the way, Stark. Otherwise I might end up marring Ms. Potts' beautiful skin and that would be such a shame."

In response, Tony stands perfectly still, not willing to give the other man an excuse. It isn't hard for him to do, as desperate as he is for her safety, his rage suddenly buried beneath his fear. When Pepper is free from the ropes, and the knife carefully and delicately placed against her skin, Carver raises her to her feet and backs carefully toward the gated cell door.

He's careful with his feet, not tripping over the thick cable or stumbling once during his backward trek, but his hand has a brutal grip on her arm as he drags her. Tony moves slowly with them, his eyes darting from Pepper's frightened, wide eyes and Carver's maniacal grip. It's when he's got Peppers gaze, and he's trying desperately to reassure her with his own eyes, that Carver moves. He isn't prepared when Pepper comes flying at him. He's overwrought, keyed up, and physically in too much pain to do anything but catch her and cushion her fall. Pepper's wrapped around him, her grip desperate, and her shoulders shuddering with her sobs. Tony slips his aching arms about her and just holds her, murmuring. They lay like that for several moments, the turn of the key in the lock and the sound of Carver's expensive shoes echoing in their ears.

After some time, Tony rouses Pepper and helps her to the bed. She clings to him when he collapses back onto the mattress.

"Shhâ€|" He's doing his best to calm her, but she's moved from sobbing and hysterics to silence and desperation wedging herself between the wall and his body in an effort at safety. Tony feels the same, subdued and frustrated by their ordeal. They lay for a long time in the dark with Pepper only coming back to herself when she inadvertently brushes against one of Tony's burns. He sucks air through his teeth in an attempt to contain his initial reaction. Pepper needs him strong and in control, if he pushes her away now, there is no way of knowing how she will react. She hears the pain in the noise despite his efforts.

"Oh, God. Tony!" She reacts quickly then, gathering the supplies from where she'd stored them before acting like she hadn't spent the last hour lost inside her own fear. She efficiently cleans and bandages Tony in the faint light put off by his reactor. With no other options, and little energy, they sleep.

It's the crunching and bending of bars that awakens them, and the familiar sound of Rhodey's voice calling through the complex that puts them at ease. Tony's alert and on guard, despite the presence of the War Machine suit and his friend's close proximity. It's just as hard for Pepper to relax; Tony can feel her practically vibrating, and it isn't until Rhodey removes the mask and smiles broadly at them

that Tony feels her relax a little in his arms. The smiles and laughs that follow are painted on and fake, and when Rhodey shoots a look at Tony over Pepper's head it's clear that he's aware of it. Tony doesn't respond to the questioning look; instead he asks, "How did you find us?"

A look passes over Rhodey's face, and Tony can practically see the wheels turning. His friend supplanting the images of Tony from the cave and afterward over the ones of him and Pepper now. The colonel is smarter than to voice it, though.

"JARVIS. Apparently that battery pack in your chest emits a very specific frequency that is fairly easy to track. We haven't had any luck in the last two months--"

"Two months?" Pepper's voice is quiet and breathy, still shocked.

Rhodey nods before continuing on, unwilling to broach that subject. "Today, about an hour ago, JARVIS did another sweep of this area. He told me as soon as he found the signal, and it wasn't long before I was into the suit and out here."

"Where are we?"

"Mexico. We--"

Pepper interrupts again. "Tony, I want to go home." His response is to pull her into his arms and kiss the top of her head, but he keeps his eyes on Rhodey.

"How soon?" There's a long pause before he replies.

"Another twenty or thirty minutes. A chopper is on its way."

"I take it no one else is in the building?"

"A thermal and audio scan of the area doesn't show anyone else. Also, I did a personal check of the space before I opened the gate. Do you guys wanna get out of here? It can't be comfortable being in here, still. There were a few rooms, more comfortable ones with food and couchesâ€¦" The speed at which Rhodey went back and forth from professional to intimate in their dealings would have been amusing to watch under different circumstances.

"No," Tony replies. "We don't wantâ€¦ that."

"We're fine here." Pepper tells him, moving back to the bed to sit. She gathers their things and has most of it neatly folded and stacked, what little of it there is, before stopping abruptly. Tony watches as she struggles with herself, the role she's acquired over the last months warring visibly with the knowledge that they don't need anything from this captivity.

He doesn't take his eyes off of her, while she debates. Rhodey tries in vain to get his attention, repeatedly, but Tony only ignores him. He can't, and won't, talk to him about Pepper or about his own feelings. Not yet. Finally he crosses over to settle next to Pepper. He places a hand on her knee in a silent support, remembering the frustration and annoyance he felt at leaving certain articles behind

in Afghanistan, the difficulty he had in letting go of things from his captivity.

The chop of helicopter blades in the distance snaps Pepper to attention again. Quickly she pulls one of his large sweatshirts from the pile and shoves it at him. "Here, put this on before anyone sees you."

He does as he's told, silently pulling the sweatshirt from her hands and pulling it over his head. The telltale glow from his reactor comfortably hidden. Rhodey waits discreetly across the room, giving Tony time to draw Pepper into his arms and hold her for a long moment. When the sound of the chopper is closer, he emits a modest "ahem" and they break apart. Pepper doesn't let him get far though; she maintains a tight grip on his hand as they traverse the corridors of their prison.

"Tony," she whispers, "I don't think I canâ€¦ I can't do this. Not yet." He stops with her in the middle of a large cinderblock hallway. Rhodey keeps going, the familiar sound of the suit's boots comforting in Tony's ears as he turns to face Pepper again.

"Baby." His words come out a whisper because he's more than a little lost here, with Pepper looking up at him for guidance and reassurance. It dawns on him that in this situation, he's the one with the prior experience. A veteran of kidnapping and torture; the idea is ironic as well as disturbing. He focuses again on Pepper and her begging and pleading eyes. "Baby, we don't have to do anything you're not ready for. We'll go back to the mansion, just us and Jarvis and Rhodey, and him only on weekends. We'll hole up there, and we'll recover."

"What ifâ€¦ Tony, I'm afraid of the people." It breaks his heart, those words coming from her mouth, but she isn't retreating from him and for that he's thankful. He pulls her into his arms and tucks her closely to him.

"Whatever it takes, Pepper, we'll be ok," he whispers, and then they walk after Rhodey and toward the waiting helicopter.

Laterâ€¦

Tony's enjoying the late evening sun, a book in his hand and a drink, for appearances' sake, on the table in front of him. His attention, however, is focused only on Pepper as she lounges in the shade on the sand. She's wearing a sapphire blue bikini, her hair pulled into a messy knot on top of her head, enjoying the heat and the humidity.

"Sir." JARVIS drags his thought away from the dark path they had begun to traverse.

"Yes, Jarvis?"

"My systems have just indicated a possible hit on the name Lincoln Carver in the vicinity of the RhÃˆne-Alpes Region of France, near the city of Chambéry. What are your instructions, Sir?"

Tony's thoughts focus, hard and violent for a moment, and he has the

fleeting urge to hit the gym, get into the ring, and beat on something or someone. He doesn't; instead, he focuses his attention back on Pepper: the curve of her shoulder, the arch of her neck, the line of her only response to JARVIS: "Monitor and Investigate."

End
file.